

Challenging Men to David-Jonathan Friendships

In trying to keep up with cultural trends that affect the church, I have heard on more than one occasion that the American church struggles to reach men because our worship services are so geared to women. Notably the music.

What I do not want to do here is to contribute to the issue of men feeling that Christianity, as practiced in the U.S., is not manly enough. And I do believe firmly that men and women are different in many fundamental ways, and that the Bible testifies to this. Being equal does not mean being the same (Genesis 5:2).

But I also want to wonder aloud if sometimes this issue isn't an excuse for why men do not get more involved in the church. The church is far more community-daily, relational discipleship ("as you're going" according to Jesus in Matthew 28:19)—than it is music and atmosphere on Sunday morning.

As such I think Christian men in my culture need something more profound than tweaks to the worship service. They need friendships. And I don't just mean "watch the game on Saturday night" or "play golf together" friendships, though these things could be part of it. I'm talking about the type of friendship that David and Jonathan had in the Old Testament in the Bible.

Here are some of the distinguishing marks of their relationship, as taken from 1 Samuel 18-20.

Jonathan and David's friendship was so deep and intimate it was called a Covenant.

“Covenant” is a word used often in the Bible to describe how God relates to us and in my opinion the best word to describe marriage between one man and one woman. It’s a word that conveys serious commitment and deep intimacy, which are phrases that we do not use often to describe male friendships in the U.S. And that is why I do not want to advocate for the feminization of men in Christianity. But the Bible is countercultural and can be uncomfortable, yet very much worth it, to practice. Perhaps women understand this better and it is unbiblical cultural stereotypes of men that prevent us from experiencing biblical covenant with our brothers in the faith.

Regardless, David and Jonathan set the bar high. Men need friendships in the church that makes them as relationally close as possible.

Jonathan sacrificed generously for David.

He gave him his robe, tunic, sword, bow and belt. This was a significant and generous way to honor his best friend. We can do this with gifts, with money and especially with time. Convenience is the enemy of covenant.

Jonathan spoke highly of David when he wasn’t around

It is one thing to speak highly of someone when you are around people who also want to speak highly of them. It’s another when you defend someone to his enemies. Especially enemies with power, as his father Saul had. Men need relationships of that kind of integrity. I want to know other men have my back even if it costs them.

Jonathan verbalized his love to David

Over and over Jonathan did things like reminding David he was for him during this frightening time and he had David reaffirm his oath to him because he loved David so much.

In my opinion, our culture bends so much towards talk being cheap and “Don’t tell me, show me” that we woefully underestimate the power of words. Words matter.

I grew up in a culture where most men never said “I love you” to each other. When I was at Welch College I can distinctly recall three different guys saying it to me. Each time I was so stunned I don’t even think I said it back. But as I’ve gotten older and less self-conscious about these type of things, I have said it to many men. I don’t say it if I know it will make the other man uncomfortable. And I am definitely not trying to communicate this as some kind of benchmark of maturity. Not every man should be expected to say it. But some way, somehow, even if it’s not those three potent words, Christian men should communicate covenant love to each other. It’s not less than manly to do so.

Jonathan was willing to risk his life to protect David

I’m convinced that men are designed by nature to protect women but friendship is a willingness to die for the other person. Jesus said it’s the greatest demonstration of love. Jonathan faced Saul’s wrathful spear for defending David.

Jonathan grieved with David

When they realized how serious the hate was that Saul had for David, they embraced and kissed and wept together. I cannot fathom many moments more intimate between two friends in the history of the world. I have always known that your true

friends are the ones who will weep with you and have recently learned that few things create intimacy in relationships like grieving together. Kissing is almost always spoken of in family contexts in the Old Testament. That is how close David and Jonathan were.

Let me close by saying how blessed of God I have been to have men in my adult life like the ones you see in the collage of pictures with the title of this article. I loved being a part of a group of men called "Southtown" my senior year at Welch College. I love being a part of REO today. I've often said of my friend Josh Crowe that filters were abolished long ago and we speak freely to each other and if he has criticism for me I will listen without being defensive (which I can't say is true in other relationships). My friend Yeomans has listened to me bare my soul dozens of times and offered correction and encouragement without judgment and has visited me in Chicago many times, at great personal cost. When my friend Andy and his wife announced to my church they were expecting their first child I ran on stage where he was playing bass and gave him a huge hug, as excited as I've ever been for someone. When my best friend Matt left Chicago a few weeks ago, I cried several times over a few days. And even though he is more of a mentor than a best friend, all of the above points apply strongly to my pastor, David.

All of these men have been Jonathans to me in some way and I have told many of them that I love them. Without any shame. Yet I don't offer any of this from a place of expertise. As I read about Jonathan and David I realize there is so much more I could be doing for the men in my life.

And as a preacher and a writer, God rarely gives me something he wants to transform in me where he doesn't want me to share with others. So that is my hope today. Be a Jonathan. Be a David. Don't let culture completely dictate how men are

supposed to treat each other. May we be countercultural in the ways the Bible teaches.